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NATIONAL FAST

OF 1847.

A HELP FOR DULY OBSERVING IT.

BY THE

REV. EDWARD BICKERSTETH,

RECTOR OF WATTON, HERTS.

VICTORIA R.

WE, taking into our most serious consideration the heavy judgments with which Almighty God is pleased to visit the iniquities of this land by a grievous scarcity and dearth of divers articles of sustenance and necessaries of life, and trusting in the mercy of Almighty God, that notwithstanding the sore punishment which he hath laid upon us, and upon our people, He will, if we turn unto Him in due contrition and penitence of heart, withdraw His afflicting hand, have therefore resolved, and do, by and with the advice of our Privy Council, hereby command, That a Public Fast and Humiliation be observed throughout those parts of our United Kingdom called England and Ireland, on *Wednesday* the *Twenty-fourth* day of *March*, One thousand eight hundred and forty-seven, that so both we and our people may humble ourselves before Almighty God, in order to obtain pardon of our sins, and may in the most devout and solemn manner send up our prayers and supplications to the Divine Majesty, for the removal of those heavy judgments which our manifold sins and provocations have most justly deserved, and under which we at this present time labour. and we do strictly charge and command, that the said Public Fast be reverently and devoutly observed by all our loving subjects in England and Ireland, as they tender the favour of Almighty God, and would avoid his wrath and indignation, and upon pain of such punishment as may be justly inflicted on all such as contemn and neglect the performance of so religious and necessary a duty: and for the better and more orderly solemnizing of the same, we have given directions to the Most Reverend the Archbishops, and the Right Reverend the Bishops of England and Ireland. to compose a Form of Prayer suitable to this occasion, to be used in all churches, chapels, and places of public worship; and to take care the same be timely dispersed through their respective dioceses.

NINTH 10,000, CORRECTED AND ENLARGED.

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NATIONAL FAST.

GOD, our Heavenly Father, has disposed our Gracious Queen to appoint Wednesday, March 24, as a day for national humiliation and fasting. This day may either greatly increase the Divine displeasure at our sins, by an unsuitable and unbecoming conduct, or, if duly observed, it may turn that displeasure away from us. The following pages have been written to help in its due observance.

The immediate cause of this fast, and the manner in which it should be observed, are stated in the Royal Proclamation.

IN THE VISITATION ITSELF, occasioning this appointment, seldom has there been a judgment more *evidently* from the hand of God. Even the Cholera was endeavoured to be traced, by many, to what are termed "natural causes." But in the present case, human science is entirely at fault. An excellent Bishop of the Church of Ireland thus described the calamity:—"I rode over a tract of country, of nearly fifty miles in extent, in the middle of July, 1846, and it was impossible to behold a more exhilarating sight. Everything spoke of abundance and prosperity. The potato plants stood up like stout shrubs or little trees, and seemed almost safe from the taint of the previous year. But in one night all was changed. I traversed the same tract of country in August, and the words of Moses concerning Egypt were literally applicable—'*The land stank.*' Corruption and rottenness met the eye on every side. The whole crop had perished." Since that period the whole power of science has been brought to bear upon the subject, and it has signally failed. After months of investigation, no one can tell with any certainty, either the cause, the character, or the remedy of the disease.

When chastisements are brought upon us by sins, it is our duty to endeavour to discover their meaning. If it be impossible to discover the intent of the Divine judgments, we cannot avoid a *repetition of the* same sins; and a consequent provoking to a still *greater degree, of the* anger of God.

It may not be wise, or just, to attempt to assign, precisely or ex-

clusively, this or that particular sin, as the sole cause of the chastisement we feel. But surely this is a fit time for the confession of many sins, all of which, doubtless, have had a share in bringing down upon us the Divine anger.

Happy would England be, if, as a nation, we duly regarded this proclamation. It is sin, and sin only, that brings down the Divine wrath either upon nations or individuals. The SINS OF THE COUNTRY are very grievous and aggravated.

Consider how mercifully God has dealt with us. He has now for many centuries favoured us with the light of Christianity. And when by our sins that light was almost lost in the darkness of the middle ages, He raised up our blessed and martyred Reformers; we were delivered from the errors of Rome, and the pure Word of God was freely proclaimed amongst us. He has continued this blessing, notwithstanding innumerable provocations, for above 300 years, again and again reviving his work amongst us; and perhaps no nation is more favoured, than we are at the present moment, with faithful preaching of the Gospel, and with the free and extended circulation of God's holy Word in every part of our land.

These religious privileges and advantages make our sins peculiarly offensive to Almighty God. (Amos iii. 2; Dan. ix. 10—12; John iii. 19, xv. 9—22; Luke x. 10—15; James iv. 17.) It may be well here for the writer, though he deeply feels his own share in the sins of the nation, more expressly to point out some of those sins. He does it with unfeigned grief and sorrow, and with hearty desires for the best good of every class of his fellow countrymen.

The GENERAL SINS OF THE COUNTRY are manifest and grievous. INTENSE WORLDLINESS is a prevailing character. The love of money and the determination to be rich has called forth a prodigious energy, and speculation, and competition. The prevailing mind of the nation is worldly. (Luke xvii. 26—30.) God has indeed in His just providence to punish the sins of all classes, brought it to pass, that *in the fulness of our sufficiency we are in straits.* The general thirst after gain has been so eager, and excited such unholy rivalry and competition, as to produce great suffering. Hence it has often arisen that the master has been unable to employ the servant, or the servant has found it difficult to subsist upon what the master could afford to pay. The only cure for these and our other evils, is for every one to return to the Lord, each from his own evil ways. If we *seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,* we shall find that all other things are *added to us.*

SABBATH-BREAKING brought down God's judgments on Jerusalem *of old (Ezek.* xx. 13, xxii. 8, xxiii. 38,) and must bring down the

Divine displeasure on us. This sin is much aggravated now by railway Sabbath desecration. That increased rapidity of communication which ought, if we had been zealous for God's honour, to have almost removed temptation to the sin on a general scale, has, in many cases, only served to increase the sin and the guilt. Sunday newspapers, worldly pleasures, traffic, and travelling, provoke our God weekly on the day which He has set apart for himself.

DRUNKENNESS is still, as is manifest from the extent to which the revenue returns prove that intoxicating liquors are drunk, and from the multiplied beer-shops, a national sin, impoverishing very many of our families, and depriving the whole country of food that is thus perverted from a wholesome use.

LUXURIOUSNESS of living, among many of the wealthier classes, and INSUBORDINATION and speaking evil of dignities, among many of the middle and lower classes of society, very widely prevail.

INFIDELITY in its various forms of open Deism, or of explaining away, by false criticism, the plain truths of Scripture; and in its false systems of human expediency, vain philosophy, and political economy, has with multitudes eaten out the strength of a scriptural faith, and produced a spirit of scepticism and indifference to all religious truth. The sins of highmindedness and unbelief are marked by St. Paul as the special reason why God will not spare. (Rom. xi. 18—21.)

THE NEGLECTED TEMPORAL AND SPIRITUAL INTERESTS OF THE POOR cry against us to God. There are one million of persons capable of attending public worship within eight miles of St. Paul's in London, who never attend, and live in this open disregard of God's worship. There are immense masses living in the greatest misery and destitution. While many in the higher classes do much for their poorer neighbours, yet it must be confessed that want of full consideration for the poor is another sin of this day. It is a painful fact, that multitudes of the poor can hardly, by their utmost efforts, procure a bare subsistence for themselves and their children. Many causes may be assigned for this, but where there is sinful indulgence or criminal neglect in their superiors, it especially becomes them to humble themselves before God. (James v. 1—5.) Religion has been rather looked upon as a system to keep men in moral order and subjection to superiors, than as the one thing needful for the salvation of immortal souls.

THE SPIRIT OF THE PUBLIC JOURNALS and of our Periodical Literature, though increasingly there are faithful testimonies for *God's truth, must*, wherever their conductors despise dominion, or *rail against authorities*, or flatter men, or are boasters, proud,

despisers of those that are good, heady, and highminded, be very offensive to God. To follow the prevailing mind of the mass of society, or of a particular party, instead of the only sure light of the word of God, and use great talents and influence for any thing contrary to that word, must be full of evil.

OUR VAST COLONIAL EMPIRE, a most responsible trust, which might have been made the means of blessing almost every land, HAS NOT BEEN DULY USED FOR GOD AND HIS GLORY; but has chiefly been used for gaining wealth and aggrandizing our country; and the spiritual interests of millions have been made subordinate to present commercial prosperity and power.

THE SINS OF THE CHURCH OF CHRIST, in the apostasy of some of its ministers to Rome, in the unfaithfulness of others, in the form of godliness without the power, and in multiplied divisions, heart-burnings, contentions, hard judgment, self-righteousness, self-indulgence, and declining of the cross, have also to be confessed.

By pride and vain glory, by ambition and rapacity, by open or secret profligacy and prostitution, by frauds in trade, by the traffic of opium in China, by oppressive exaction of labours in factories, mining, and of women and the lower orders generally, by slander and quarrelling, by swearing, cursing, and perjuries, we have as a nation grievously sinned against God.

Oh, may all feel that Christ, the Saviour, our One, our only Saviour, the glory of our religion, the only hope of sinners, *the name to which every knee must bow*, has been greatly neglected. His grace has not been duly set forth, nor cordially and generally received, by those who profess his name, and are under the solemn bonds of baptismal vows, to yield themselves to his service.

We have each also personal sins to be confessed, and to humble ourselves for. All our transgressions of God's law, and all our abuse or neglect of his gospel, make a part of the national guilt, and add to its fearful amount.

The root of these sins is our casting off the fear of God, and living as without God in the world. This state of mind must be very displeasing to Him *in whom we live, and move, and have our being.*

Our national principles, as embodied in our Confessions, and Liturgy, and Constitution, have been eminently Christian, but our conduct has not corresponded with our principles; and in our PUBLIC AND NATIONAL PROCEEDINGS we have not duly acknowledged Him who has said, *Them that honour me I will honour.*

But let us more distinctly notice THAT NATIONAL SINFULNESS CONNECTED WITH IRELAND, which may have filled up our sins so as to bring *this particular* visitation upon us. And first, I would fully

admit that many have done that which is by others, and I think justly, viewed as nationally sinful, believing it to be right, and for the good of the country. Some have concurred in such measures, who would be grieved at them from their hearts if they were convinced they were sinful. Let us, then, see on what ground these measures stand.

The character of our National Constitution, as settled at the Revolution in 1688, was essentially Christian, scriptural, and Protestant. The two main features of Antichristianity, Romanism, and Socinianism, were repudiated, while scriptural and Evangelical Christianity was favoured. It is painful to think, that the national testimony has been set aside by special favour shown to Socinianism and Romanism. But especially, England has sorely neglected Ireland; and, as a neglected child brings disgrace and suffering both on its parents and on itself, so Ireland has proved a cause of shame and trouble to England, while it is full of wretchedness and suffering in itself.

England has professed to establish and maintain a Protestant Church in Ireland. Yet for centuries has she left a large proportion of the people, speaking the Irish language, so entirely without instruction, that among 1,000 parochial incumbents, there perhaps have seldom been *five* who could declare to the people, in their own tongue, the wonderful works of God.

Large estates have been granted, two or three centuries since, for the express purpose of the encouragement of Protestantism in Ireland. Yet these conditions have been wholly disregarded.

Thus, left in the hands of the Romish priests, the bulk of the people have been taught to hate and abhor Protestantism, and the Protestant sway of England. To murder the Protestant clergyman, or the landowner, or the policeman, has been regarded by the people as a praiseworthy act; and when brought to justice, the convicted murderers have been viewed as martyrs. The mid-day assassin has frequently passed through thousands of people, all of whom, by shielding him from justice, made the act and its guilt their own. Thus the people of Ireland became deeply stained with blood-guiltiness. But God has said, that in his sight, "*Blood defileth the land, and it cannot be cleansed, but by the blood of him that shed it.*" He speaks also of the shedding of innocent blood, as a sin "*which the Lord would not pardon.*"

Thus both England and Ireland have deserved the present chastisement. And the time of its infliction deserves to be noticed. Instead of repenting of her past neglects, England resolved, in 1845 *—not to take measures* for the effectual preaching of the Gospel in *Ireland—but rather to* concede still further patronage and favour to

that Church, holding errors which the Members of Government had themselves declared to be superstitious and idolatrous.

For centuries we have presented the harsh features of a mere political upholding of Protestantism, and now we have fallen into the opposite error. It should be most humbling to British Christians to think that Ireland owes the introduction of Romanism to the British nation of past ages; and Ireland owes the continuance of Popery for centuries to Britain's grievous neglect of scriptural means for enlightening it; and Ireland owes the upholding of Romanism in this day to the British nation, of this generation, encouraging and endowing its Institutions at this time. A large National Institution was founded by Act of Parliament, for the purpose of teaching what other Acts of Parliament had denominated "blasphemous errors and dangerous deceits." And this fearful act of infidelity, or gross inconsistency, was declared to be a measure "to tranquillize Ireland." But in less than one month after the full adoption of this act of national unfaithfulness, that plague broke out in Ireland, which has gone on increasing up to this hour, and which is now filling England with gloom and embarrassment; while it covers Ireland with suffering and with death. Thus England's unfaithfulness and Ireland's idolatry and blood-guiltiness are all visited by one stroke; and both nations, having grievously sinned in his sight, have merited that chastisement with which we have now been visited.

Christian faithfulness to my own convictions has required me, as a watchman of the Lord and an elder brother, to give this testimony. Yet would I not lay the stress of the need of national fasting and humiliation on this one sin alone. Still less should we lay the whole charge of this sin, which had its real root in national unbelief, and indifference to scriptural truth, to the Government of our country. That secret UNBELIEF in the almighty power and holy Providence of God, as the righteous King of nations, out of which particular offences have grown, and without repentance will grow hereafter, is the sin to be chiefly deplored and forsaken. There is enough of universally admitted sin, however men may differ here, to account for this visitation, and for all to humble ourselves before God on this national fast. Let each one seriously and deeply humble himself for all known and admitted sin, and God may then reveal to him more clearly those unknown sins, in himself or in the nation at large, which have been further causes of the Divine displeasure, and of this heavy judgment. The present evil may be removed, and all may yet be overruled for good, if we search and try our ways, humble ourselves each for our own sins, and turn again to the Lord, and seek him *with fasting and weeping and mourning*. How gracious his

invitation! *Return, thou backsliding Israel, saith the Lord, and I will not cause mine anger to fall upon you; for I am merciful, saith the Lord, and I will not keep anger for ever. Only acknowledge thine iniquity that thou hast transgressed against the Lord thy God.*

These are some of the chief causes of this heavy judgment which hangs over us, and the chief reasons therefore for a national humiliation. I would now endeavour to give you some HELP FOR ITS DUE OBSERVANCE.

Fasting is a scriptural duty, especially in the time of necessity and distress. It is plainly required in God's Holy Word, not only privately (Matt. vi. 16—18; Mark ii. 20), but also as a national act. (Joel ii. 12—18.)

The chief end or design of a fast is well expressed in a collect of the Church of England, that may be profitably used by us on this occasion:—

PRAYER FOR GRACE TO FAST.—O Lord, who for our sakes didst fast forty days and forty nights, give us grace to use such abstinence that, our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey Thy godly motions, in righteousness and true holiness, to thy honour and glory, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. Amen.

The mode of observing this fast must depend on circumstances. Where health will not suffer, and we shall not thereby be hindered in our religious duty, a total abstinence from food may be proper—but all ought to abstain from mere animal gratifications; and, like Daniel, to *eat no pleasant bread* during the fast. The heads of Christian families may easily make arrangements for this end; explaining their intentions the evening before, having no regular meals, but such necessary food as may be requisite for going through the duties of the day, and to prevent injury to the health.

The special duties of a fast day are—

1. SEPARATION FROM COMPANY. Retirement and seclusion, as far as our circumstances admit, in those parts of the day not engaged in public duties, that we may have time for secret communion with God, are important means of edification; much and earnest private prayer is the root of a blessing on all other duties of this day.

2. SELF-EXAMINATION. We should look back on our past lives, retrace our whole conduct towards God and our fellow-creatures, and compare it with the rules of God's Word. Our greater offences, our secret sins, our omissions, the true state of our souls, should be subjects of close and thorough scrutiny with earnest prayer, such as David offered:—*Search me, O Lord, and know my heart: try me and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead*

me in the way everlasting. (Ps. cxxxix. 23, 24.) Our own sins, diligently and honestly searched out, will shew us how large has been our personal share of national guilt, and what reason we, individually, have to be humbled before God.

3. CONFESSION OF SIN is another peculiar duty of such a day. How particular Daniel's confession of sin was when he fasted, we see fully manifested in that striking prayer recorded in his 9th chapter! It well becomes us, this day, not only to join in the public confession of the congregation, but in private, largely and fully, freely and ingenuously, to confess, with all their aggravations, the sins which a diligent self-examination has brought before us.

4. HOLY RESOLUTIONS OF AMENDMENT should be formed in the strength of Christ, and with a due regard to his glory. We should determine, by God's grace, to turn from all our evil ways, to undo all that we have sinfully done, and make restitution to all those we have injured. Zaccheus's was a noble resolution, and may be a good pattern for all those who have acquired unjust gain—*Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor, and if I have wronged any man I restore to him fourfold.* Let us, PERSONALLY, begin anew to live to God, and consecrate ourselves afresh to his service; and let FAMILY reformations also commence on this day.

5. INTERCESSION, again, is peculiarly a duty at this season, not only in public prayer, but also in private. Thus Abraham interceded for Sodom: Thus Daniel poured out his soul in fervent intercession, and while he was *speaking in prayer*, he obtained an answer to his supplications. Thus David, in the time of pestilence, interceded and prevailed in behalf of Jerusalem.

6. MERCY TO OTHERS is a peculiarly suitable accompaniment to fasting. How express is the Divine record here—*Is not this the fast that I have chosen, to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? When thou seest the naked that thou cover him, and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily.* Let each family consecrate something on the Fast-day to the relief of the Irish and Scotch. If every family in Great Britain contributed something, so as to average one shilling each family, 200,000*l.* would be raised. In these last days, let us not forget how much the near and coming final judgment of all men turns upon the fruit of faith, in works of mercy.

To strengthen you to perform these duties, lift up your eyes to Him whom God has *exalted* to be a Prince and a Saviour to give

repentance and remission of sins. (Acts v. 31.) *He has received gifts even for the rebellious,* and will abundantly give his Holy Spirit to them that ask Him. (Luke xi. 13.)

Having pointed out the duties of a Fast-day, it may be well also to notice some DANGERS to which we are exposed at such a time.

1. HYPOCRISY, or outside fasting, without any inward humiliation, is very offensive to God. *Beware ye of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.* (Luke xii. 1.) *Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high. Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord?* (Isaiah lviii. 4, 5.) To make a show of it for the sake of gaining a religious name among men, is totally to pervert that which was designed for humility and self-abasement.

2 SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS, or thinking better of ourselves on account of it, and that we do something in fasting to merit God's favour, is another gross perversion of this sacred duty. The true meaning of this duty is an open confession of our sinfulness, unworthiness, and just exposure to the wrath of Almighty God, and an acknowledgement of our entire dependence on his sovereign mercy and grace for a free salvation, through faith in the atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Luke xviii. 9—14.)

3. TRIFLING WITH A FAST is another danger to which, in this age, we are greatly exposed. The messengers of Hezekiah inviting the people of Israel to turn again unto the Lord their God, were by many *laughed to scorn and mocked* (2 Chron. xxx. 10), but some *humbled themselves* and came to Jerusalem. God grant that it may be with us as it then was *in Judah,* where *the hand of the Lord was to give them one heart to do the commandment of the king, and of the princes, by the word of the Lord.* (verse 12.) Oh! may every reader beware of ridiculing or slighting a service which, if so treated, is a gross insult upon God, and must bring down his serious displeasure.

4. MAKING IT A DAY OF BUSINESS is forbidden in God's word. *Behold, in the day of your fast, ye exact all your labours.* (Isaiah lviii. 3.) Masters of families, those in business who have many dependants, and those who have many labourers, are called to give those dependant on them this day for those religious duties and observances for which it is set apart.

There is another sin marked in Scripture with special reproof.

5. MAKING IT A DAY OF PLEASURE. Behold, in the day of your

fast ye find pleasure. (Isaiah lviii. 3.) Against this sin there is an awful threatening thus stated :—*In that day did the Lord of hosts call to weeping and to mourning, and to baldness, and to girding with sackcloth : and behold joy and gladness, slaying oxen, and killing sheep eating flesh and drinking wine: let us eat and drink; for to-morrow we die.* And what was the result of such a mockery of God? The Prophet goes on :—*And it was revealed in mine ears by the Lord of hosts, surely this iniquity shall not be purged from you till ye die, saith the Lord of hosts.* (Isaiah xxii. 12—14.)

We have many encouraging EXAMPLES of the good effects of a fast duly observed. The reader is referred to the cases of Jehoshaphat (2 Chron. xx. 3), Esther (iv. 16), the People of Nineveh (Jonah iii. 4), Ezra (viii. 21—23 ; x. 6), Nehemiah (i. 4), and Daniel (ix. 10).

Such passages of Scripture as the following are very suitable for private reading :—Psalm li. ; Isaiah i. liii. lv. lviii. ; Ezekiel ix. xviii. ; Daniel ix. ; Jonah iii. iv. ; Joel. ii. ; Matt. ix. ; Luke xv. ; Romans iii. ; 2 Tim. iii. ; Hebrews xii. ; the whole Epistles of James, Peter John, and Jude.

In conclusion, we would earnestly entreat every reader to attend to the direction given by Isaiah :—*Wash you, make you clean, put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes, cease to do evil, learn to do well, seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.* And to assist you in fulfilling these directions, consider how rich is the following promise, embracing the fullest forgiveness of sins of every character, and of the deepest dye :—*Come now and let us reason together, saith the Lord: Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow—though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.* Well may we entertain the liveliest hopes, when the only-begotten Son of the Most High became man, lived, shed his most precious blood, died, rose again, and now intercedes that sin may be forgiven and the sinner pardoned, justified, adopted into the Divine Family, sanctified, and for ever blessed. *God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him, should not perish, but have everlasting life* (John iii. 16.)

If the present calamity do not lead us to general repentance, it will undoubtedly bring heavier and severer judgments. They are already impending over us. Our Lord, when the Jews told him of the blood of the Galileans shed by Pilate with their sacrifices, said, *Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.* If judgments on others lead not those who have been spared to repentance, they will be soon

visited with heavier calamities, as the Jews were in the total destruction of their city and temple, and the scattering of the nation.

If this public fast be indeed a *national act*, and duly observed, we may yet have the most cheering expectations of good for our country. While other nations are casting off religious ordinances, it would be a blessed token for England if we were only thereby made more zealous in the service of God. Then, indeed, we should be delivered from all our evils, and should become a nation whom God delighted to honour and to bless.

But though we cannot influence a nation, we may each for ourselves and in our own circle, obey those in authority over us, confess our Saviour, and follow the directions of God's Word; and we shall individually find for ourselves that promise realized, *thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.* (Matt. vi. 18.) It is to a due observance of fasting and its accompanying duties that the gracious promise is made—*Then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noon-day. And the Lord shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters fail not, and they that be of thee shall build the old waste places, thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations, and thou shalt be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of paths to dwell in.* (Isaiah lviii. 10—12.)

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